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ABSTRACT

For many students, school is not a place to explore new ideas or develop fresh perspectives. School is a place where there are "positions" that they must "defend" in the "arena" of the classroom. If they do muster up the courage to participate, they have learned what it is like to lose: they describe it as being "slaughtered," "blown away," or "shredded." It would be useful to move classroom dialogue from a rhetoric of "either/or" to a rhetoric of "both/and." In his article, "On Viewing Rhetoric as Epistemic," R. L. Scott suggests that the "both/and" approach could be a way of using rhetoric in a world of conflicting claims. Humans come to knowledge through a process of action. Students and scholars learn because they act--they express opinions, they ask questions--but are they learning the truth? Scott points out that if truth is relative, as anti-foundationalists believe, to know anything with certainty is difficult, and the fear of uncertainty can sometimes result--as P. Bizzell has pointed out--in a failure to act, or quietism, or skepticism. A "rhetoric" of both/and could be a way of knowing conflicts, a way of arguing differences and accepting them. The both/and approach persuades but does not impose. As a means of knowing in the classroom, both/and rhetoric reflects the relative nature of truth while encouraging dialogue as a means of pursuing truth. (Contains six references.) (TB)

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Toward a Rhetoric of Both/And

Rosalee McLaughlin

One Tuesday afternoon last November, my class and I watched O.J. Simpson's face collapse into relief when he heard himself acquitted of double murder. As we sat around our big seminar table watching the television, the group of fifteen college freshmen gasped as the verdict was read. Jennifer clenched her fist and shook it at the television. Jua dropped his head in his hands to hide his face. A young woman to my right whispered, No, No, No. Lance and Jed—two young men who had been outspoken about their belief in a future race war—rolled their eyes at each other as they slouched even lower into their baseball caps. And then—nothing but silence. As their teacher, I felt it was important to talk about the verdict and our feelings about it. Anything—even simple venting—would be better than sitting there silently, hardening into our own little spaces, erecting turrets of self-defense around ourselves, frozen into positions that we couldn't express, let alone examine. I knew that they would talk freely with each other out in the hall, but then, in my classroom, it seemed they had nothing to say. Why?

This kind of quietism—for that is what I have come realize it is—arises, I believe, only secondarily out of the students' own experience at college, but it is here they learn to refine it. Or, if they manage to speak, they quickly learn to adopt defensive postures. From their point of view, as they've told it to me, they see no other sensible choice. For them, school isn't a place to explore new ideas or develop fresh perspectives. School is place where there are only "positions" that they must "defend" in the "arena" of the classroom, with words as their weapons. If they do muster up the courage to enter the fray, they also tell me what it feels like to "lose": to them it feels like being "slaughtered," "blown away," or "shredded." As a graduate student, I've experienced both the war metaphor as it is enacted in the classroom and the quietism that results from such an atmosphere. Like a good soldier, I've seen myself sit back and let others do the volunteering, rather than risk my sense of self, my intellectual ego, and my (quite local) reputation by exposing myself to the "big guns" who go for the throat. Haven't you experienced this fear yourself? My freshman students are not the only ones sensitive to the war games we play here in the academy—we are all deeply affected by this rhetoric of contention and the silence it provokes.

In my classroom that day in November, the students eventually pulled out of the silence that threatened to get a choke-hold on them. I think this happened, first, because they were only fifteen in number and had consequently come to know each other and me very well by that point in the semester, and—perhaps even more importantly—because we had practiced disagreeing with each other in what I believe was a fairly safe and supportive environment. Each one of us had played the "devil's advocate" and what we came to call the "angel's fool" in various issues prior to the Simpson verdict. We had practiced these roles as we were shaping our "positions" for our argumentative theses. Although even that simple exercise was difficult at first for some of them to risk participating in, we had grown to like thinking up all the reasons why, for instance, someone would like campus cafeteria food, or why someone would argue that there was plenty of parking at our school, or why smokers should have the right to smoke in public, etc. But, as I learned that day of the Simpson verdict, they were not easily able to transfer the playfulness of our classroom exercises to this "real world" event. Once again, talking became a deadly matter, one in which the slightest slip of the lip could spell disaster.

My students' sense that only raw power in arguing will keep them from being "killed" in the classroom is also directly linked to their experience in this place we called the "real world." For it's not only in the classroom that we have to defend ourselves from attack, of course. Our "arenas" now include any place that people congregate: federal buildings, shopping malls, skyscrapers, courtrooms, the streets, the grounds of this campus, our families. The crime statistics tell us this is so. As a people, we are becoming quiet because speaking is so dangerous. My students became quiet in the face of the O.J. Simpson verdict not because they had nothing to say, but because it was too dangerous to say anything. They have not had enough practice in the rhetoric of "both/and" to ward off the effects of the rhetoric of "either/or."

Needing a place to practice critical thinking

But isn't college the most appropriate place to practice using these critical faculties so that we can do battle in the real world? It would seem so. Bizzell goes on in her essay to point out, though, that in the anti-foundational urge to destroy all privilege and positions of authority, skepticism rather than critical evaluation has become a trademark of academic posturing. Skepticism was at first a revolutionary "principled position from which to articulate a political critique" but more recently has become an institutionalized ideology (671). Not only has this skepticism become entrenched in the academy, but Bizzell sees it as a prevailing view of the public at large. She points to the remarks of Jackson Lears, who sees skepticism as becoming the "pervasive irony" of our age. It is the "hip smirk," as he calls it, seen in the cultural milieu of television. It is, for instance, the medium's "subtle way of threatening the viewer to abandon belief in anything or else risk becoming the butt of a sit-com joke" (671). Furthermore, Bizzell goes on to relate Lears' analysis to the effect of this "hip smirk" on our society, an effect in which

> . . . we are left with a form of domination that seems at once archaic and peculiarly modern—one that is dependent not only on the imposition of belief but on the absence of belief, the

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> creation of a void in which only power matters. . . . The aim of TV irony is not to promote "progressive" political ideals but to discredit all ideals by enlisting viewers in a comprehensive program of subtle self-oppression: urging them. . . to turn themselves into models of blasé self-containment. (60) (qtd in Bizzell, 671).

When students say that the classroom is not a place for learning and growth but, instead, is a war zone where those who are most willing to accuse or "interrogate" the expression of values in others become the privileged speakers, these students are primed by their culture to adopt the academic "hip smirk of skepticism" and to remain quiet. It's a matter of survival. When my students, for instance, encountered the Simpson verdict and the questions about race and power in our society it uncovered, they were hesitant to avow any belief for or against the system that exonerated him. To do so would expose their values—that soft underbelly of assumptions—to ridicule and attack. In the larger academic "arena" in my department, the graduate seminars and mailroom conversations, our quietism took the form of a "wait and see" attitude. Our department's new electronic forum, the listserv set up just for the purpose of such discussion, was entirely silent on the matter. Like the students in my class, we felt safer saying nothing rather than to expose our values to assault. If individuals in our community had any viewpoints or insights that would have helped the rest of us understand how our system of justice was working for or failing us, such contributions were lost.

Whether or not we react in silence or choose to evade speaking about issues like the Simpson case by claiming to wait and see how others respond, I agree with Bizzell when she points out that there remains a "philosophical void on which the political status quo can inscribe its dominant ideologies" (671). We will, in other words, continue to accept the prevailing assumptions of the society (or those who have assumed the privilege of speaking for the society) if through fear of attack we fail to explore the issues on our own and in discussion with others. As an antidote to this situation, I also concur with Bizzell's solution to this "philosophical void" of quietism in which she says,

> [W]e will have to articulate a positive program legitimated by an authority that is nevertheless non-foundational. We must help our students, and our fellow citizens, to engage in a rhetorical process that can collectively generate trustworthy knowledge and beliefs conducive to the common good—knowledge and beliefs to displace the repressive ideologies an unjust social order would inscribe in the skeptical void.

Bizzell's program is something she refers to as a condition of "rhetorical authority" in which the "orator" or rhetor can recommend a positive position (as opposed to a skeptical non-position) but does not impose it: "The orator tries to achieve a consensus around the change in ideologies he or she advocates, but a consensus can only be achieved through collective participation in the rhetorical process" (673). Authority thus becomes less threatening to and more involved in developing a sense of community with regard to any sort of social interaction, both in the classroom and beyond. Bizzell concludes her thoughts about the debilitating "smirk of skepticism" we are currently wearing by inviting other scholars "to join seriously in a rhetorical process for articulating an alternative to which many of us can agree," and she names this process as "utopian rhetoric" (674). I'm not sure what she means by "utopian" rhetoric, but I do understand her exhortation to action. For our students, our society, and ourselves, we need to practice a process of disagreeing and agreeing that isn't killing us or quieting us.

Establishing a rhetoric of both/and

And so we come to a rhetoric of "both/and" instead of a rhetoric of "either/or" that I'm implying could be one answer for practicing this process of disagreeing and agreeing. As Robert L. Scott describes it in his essay "On Viewing Rhetoric As Epistemic," such a process could be a way of using rhetoric in "a world of conflicting claims." Scott describes this process as one in which we as human beings come to knowledge through a process of action. We learn because we act—we express opinions, we discuss, we ask questions. This is how we come to understand or are enabled to know. To know what, though? The Truth? Scott goes on to point out that if truth is relative, as anti-foundationalists believe it is, to know anything with certainty is difficult, and the fear of uncertainty can sometimes result—as Bizzell pointed out—in a failure to act, or quietism, or skepticism. As he describes it,

> If one cannot be certain, however, then one must either withdraw from the conflicts of life or find some way to act in the face of these conflicts. [We] must say with Gorgias, 'I know the irreconcilable conflicts, and yet I act' . . . (317)

In other words, if there is a way of acting in this world rife with disagreement that allows us to construct truths we can agree upon as we need them, then what I am calling a "rhetoric" of both/and is a way of knowing conflicts, a way of arguing our differences. A "rhetoric of both/and" allows us rhetorical authority which seeks, as Bizzell said, to persuade but does not impose.

Of course, the next question should be, How can rhetoric "as a way of knowing"—what I've called "both/and"—help us to cope in an increasingly alienated world? Understanding that truths can be relative, and that rhetoric-as-action is a way of making those truths for ourselves, should help alleviate the almost murderous need to be right, to have the Truth, which I have described as nearly endemic, without lapsing into silence. Using rhetoric as a way of knowing in the classroom would be a way of social action that teachers can begin now to teach to their students. For instance, we can learn to think of argument and arguing in a different way, one that reflects the relative nature of truth and encourages us to differ with each other as a means of pursuing truth.

Jim W. Corder urges us to do this when he claims that, if rhetoric is a way of knowing, then "argument is emergence toward the other" ("Argument" 423). This idea of emergence is crucial to developing a new pedagogy of argument. If we are engaged in "display and presentation," as we are when we teach students to construct arguments, for instance, then we are engaged that old war metaphor of defending and attacking "positions" instead, Corder says, of learning to be with one another (422). He goes on to say (and I agree) that

> [W]e arguers must learn to abandon authoritative positions. They cannot be achieved, at any rate, except as in arrogance, ignorance, and dogma we convince ourselves that we have reached authority. We should not want to achieve an authorita-

> tive position, anyway. An authoritative position is a prison both to us and to any audience. (425)

Instead of clinging to authority to make ourselves feel certain, I would say that Corder correctly emphasizes the action that is possible with a rhetoric of emergence instead of a rhetoric of contention. He calls this rhetorical action a "generative ethos that. . . makes a commodious universe" (427) and which, in turn, resists closure. When we practice abandoning the closed position of "Authority," we open up the possibility for action not only in ourselves but in those around us. As Corder writes:

> We must keep learning as speakers/narrators/arguers (and as hearers). We can learn to dispense with what we imagined to be absolute truth and to pursue the reality of things only partially knowable. We can learn to keep adding pieces of knowledge here, to keep rearranging pieces over yonder, to keep standing back and turning to see how things look elsewhere. We can learn that our narrative/argument doesn't exist except as it is composed and that the 'act of composition can never end' . . . . (425)

This is a very different way of looking at argument than we are used to.

If we were able to reconcile argument as a form of moving toward the Other, as Corder says, or rhetoric as a way of knowing, as Scott has defined it, then how could we change the way we teach it? We can study the ancient history of argument and track down other approaches to it rather than the one we've been patterning our discourse on for so many years, the "either/or" foundational model. This is what rhetoricians are doing when they study the pre-Socratics. We can also study contemporary scholars like Carl Rogers and his "Rogerian rhetoric" based on cooperation and flexibility, or Peter Elbow and his "doubting and and believing game." We can explore and expand upon these and other non-combative theories of argumentation, as Young, Becker, and Pike and Maxine Hairston have done with Rogerian rhetoric. We would do well to continue to build on this kind of alternative to the verbal wargames that emulate other, more dangerous behavior. We would be wise to keep looking for a way out of a position of "either/or" to an "emergence toward one another" as a way to cope in a world as terribly violent as ours.

Today, as I finish writing these words, I hear on the news another compelling reason to practice rhetoric as a way of knowing the both/and of argument. The "Doomsday Clock" that is kept as a symbol of humankind's race against nuclear holocaust by activists in New York City was adjusted to reflect the new, emerging adversarial relationship with the former Soviet Union. Since 1991, the hands of the clock have stood at seventeen minutes to nuclear midnight, that ground-zero of destruction for life on earth. Today, at the end of 1995, we are now fourteen minutes away from permanent silence. The journalist covering the story blames it on America's "complacent attitude and the general reticence to speak out." We had better learn how to talk to each other, starting here.

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